

# **A Review of the Research on Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Teaching**

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## **Abstract**

**Individual differences refer to the differences in learners' own characteristics or personal factors that affect second language learning, including factors such as age, language ability, cognitive style, learning motivation, and personality. Of course, there are other factors that affect second language acquisition. Judging from the current research results, we cannot explain which individual factors play an irreplaceable role in the success of second language acquisition. Therefore, this article attempts to review the current research on individual differences, aiming to reveal the importance of individual differences research for learners' second language acquisition, and at the same time provide useful clues for future research in this area.**

## **Keywords**

**Second language acquisition; Individual differences; Foreign language teaching.**

## **1. Introduction**

The relationship and influence of learners' individual differences on second language acquisition and foreign language teaching have been widely concerned in language teaching. Linguists such as Krashen, Diane Larsen-Freeman & Michael H. Long, Ellis have made extensive and profound studies on learners' individual differences in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, and achieved remarkable results. Krashen (1981) analyzes second language learning from the perspectives of "acquisition" and "learning", emphasizing the role of understanding meaning in language learning. Language structure is established on the basis of understanding content, reflecting the importance of language communication, and teaching should be centered on meeting the needs of learners and advocate student-centered teaching methods. This distinction helps to understand the difference between mother tongue and foreign language or second language learning, enriches language cognitive theory, and provides a theoretical basis for foreign language and second foreign language teaching methods. Diane Larsen-Freeman & Michael H. Long (2000) discusses the application of error analysis, interlanguage theory, language acquisition environment, learner individual differences, cognitive theory and linguistic theory in second language acquisition research and so on. Meanwhile, they also reviewed the research methods in the field of second language acquisition. Ellis (2015) mentioned the framework of the main research areas of second language acquisition. He envisioned the framework as five aspects: environmental factors, input, learner differences, and learners' learning methods.

In a word, the core of second language acquisition is to reveal the potential process of learning another language and the study of learners' individual differences has become one of the main research directions in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching. Learning a second language is pluralistic and involves a variety of factors and processes, such as learning process, learners' cognition, emotional characteristics and learning environment. The study of individual differences focuses on physiological factors including gender and age, while

cognitive factors include intelligence, mother tongue thinking, cultural background, linguistic competence and cognitive style. Affective factors include the effects of personality characteristics, language learning strategies, learning motivation and attitude on learning. The goal of the study of individual differences is also to find the general rules behind the differences. The research contributes to a deep understanding of the second language learning process and helps to improve the efficiency of foreign language teaching.

## 2. Review of Related Literature

As an independent research field, the study of second language acquisition has a history over 40 years. With the expansion and deepening of the research field, second language acquisition has gradually become a mature, interdisciplinary discipline with a complete knowledge system and research methods. Among them, individual differences such as learners' age, attitude, motivation and anxiety have gradually become the focus of the study of learners' individual differences. Ellis (1994) divides learners' individual differences into three categories: first, learners' perception of language acquisition; second, learners' individual emotional state; and third, the study of general factors related to learners' individual differences, such as learners' age, motivation and learning aptitude. The author will make a brief introduction to the research on individual differences from the following aspects.

### 2.1. Research on Learning Attitude

Stern(2015) divides the learning attitude into three aspects: the learner's attitude towards the language and the language learner, the attitude towards the target language community and the target speaker, and the learner's attitude towards learning the target language. Ellis (1994) divides the learning attitude into the attitude towards the target language, the attitude towards the target language speaker, the attitude towards the target language culture, the attitude towards the social value of learning the target language, the attitude towards the specific purpose of the target language, and the attitude towards being a member of one's own culture. Generally speaking, the second language learners' attitude towards the target language, the target language community and their culture is positive, which will have a positive impact on their language acquisition; on the contrary, if the second language learners' attitude towards the target language and its culture is negative, it will have a negative impact on their language acquisition. Some studies have shown that positive attitudes do not necessarily have a positive impact on learners' language acquisition. Negative attitudes may also have a positive impact on learners' language acquisition. From this point of view, the relationship between learners' attitude and the effect of language acquisition is very complex, not a simple linear correspondence.

### 2.2. Research on Learners' Motivation

In the field of second language acquisition motivation research, Dornyei's(1998) foreign language learning motivation theory is widely influential, which defines and measures foreign language learning motivation from three levels: language level, learner level and learning situation level. Its most important feature is that it embodies the organic combination of language learning motivation and teaching situation, broadens the breadth and depth of motivation research, and has more positive pedagogical significance. Williams and Burden's(1997) social constructionism motivation model also has a great influence. They believe that motivation is a state of cognitive and emotional awakening. Learners' learning motivation is awakened for certain reasons, and then they make decisions to take action, and then make continuous efforts to achieve certain goals. In second language acquisition, it is self-evident that individual motivation for learning a second language plays an extremely important

role. Once learners have a clear motivation, they will set goals, and with goals, learners will make clear learning plans and move towards their goals. Because individual motivation is different, the motivation and attitude of language learning are different, and the persistence and consciousness of learning are naturally different, which leads to differences in the effect of second language acquisition. The purpose of our research on second language acquisition motivation is to explore ways and methods to stimulate students' second language acquisition motivation, stimulate learners' learning motivation and improve the efficiency of second language teaching.

### **2.3. Research on Learners' Age**

The role of learner's age in second language acquisition has always been a controversial issue. The focus of the debate is whether there is a critical period for second language learners like native language learners. The so-called "critical period" refers to a certain stage of life development, at this stage, people can easily and quickly acquire a foreign language without external intervention or special learning. Lenneberg (1967) developed this view and believes that the critical period for natural language acquisition is from the age of 2 to before puberty, during which language acquisition can proceed easily and naturally. Krashen and Scarcella (1979) conducted a special study on this, and believed that adults are better than children in second language acquisition speed, and older children are better than younger children. Therefore, in terms of the speed of second language acquisition, the elderly are dominant. Another aspect of age that affects second language acquisition is the final second language level of the second language learner, that is, whether the second language proficiency of the second language learner can reach the native language level.

### **2.4. Research on Learners' Anxiety**

Horwitz & Cope (1986) classifies foreign language learning anxiety into three categories: communication anxiety, test anxiety and anxiety about negative evaluation. Existing studies on this anxiety often ask subjects to classify their anxiety and find out the root causes of anxiety. In 1975, Gardner and Smythe measured students' anxiety when learning French for the first time in one of their studies. Later, Gardner and Smythe created English Use Anxiety and English Test Anxiety. "English Use Anxiety" was later used by Gardner and others to measure the learning of French, Spanish (Muchick Wolfe, 1982) and other languages. Krashen puts forward a hypothesis on the negative correlation between anxiety and second language learning performance, which holds that anxiety produces affective filter, which makes students unable to respond quickly to language input, which has a negative effect on language learning. There are few studies on the relationship between second language learners' personality, anxiety and second language learning strategies and learning achievement in China. Qian Xujing (1999) used "English Use Anxiety" to study the anxiety of learners of Chinese as a second language and found that anxiety was significantly negatively correlated with oral performance. Anxiety is an easy variable to change. In teaching, it is not difficult for teachers to reduce students' anxiety by changing teaching methods, so as to improve learners' learning performance.

### **2.5. Research on Cognitive Style**

Cognitive style refers to the way people perceive, interpret, organize, and recall information. Everyone is considered to have a generally consistent pattern of cognitive activity. The most concerned dichotomy in second language acquisition is field dependence and field independence. There are many hypotheses about the influence of field dependence and field independence in second language acquisition. The most famous hypothesis is that field dependence may prove to be the most stimulating effect in natural second language acquisition, while field independence may bring greater success in classroom learning. A large number of studies (Abraham 1985, Brown 1991, Ellis 1989) have confirmed this point: the cognitive

styles of field independence and field dependence have certain advantages in second language acquisition. Brown (1991) believes that the cognitive methods of field independence and field dependence have their importance in different learning environments. Jamieson (1992) also believes that field dependence is more predictive of learners' communicative and pragmatic ability. And Abraham (1985) once found that field-independent learners performed well in the deductive method, while field-dependent learners performed well in the inductive method. Therefore, it is difficult to determine which cognitive style of field independence and field dependence is more conducive to second language acquisition. The relationship between field independence and field dependence and second language acquisition depends on the learning task, learning level, learning environment and teaching methods, etc., because cognitive methods are only one of many factors that affect second language acquisition, and it cannot explain second language acquisition. It's all about success or failure.

### 3. Conclusion

Generally speaking, there are many factors that affect second language acquisition, among which individual differences such as age, personality and motivation are some of them. Only by adopting corresponding teaching strategies according to the specific conditions of second language learners, creating a harmonious and personalized language learning environment, cultivating students' interest in learning and setting clear learning goals, can we improve teaching efficiency, improve the effect of second language acquisition and achieve the purpose of teaching.

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